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Our Man in the Kremlin

Penkovsky Fate Never in Doubt

Twelfth in a Series

By Frank Gibney

"On May 7, 1963, in Moscow in the Court of Session Hall of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., there began an open trial in the criminal case of the agent of the British and American intelligence services and citizens of the U.S.S.R. O. V. Penkovsky and the subject of Britain and spy go-between, Greville Wynne."

—Information release, Military Collegium of the Soviet Supreme Court.

The trial of Col. Penkovsky and Greville Wynne lasted all of four days, and one of these days was occupied by a closed session. The verdict was never in doubt. Penkovsky was sentenced to death, Wynne to 16 years' imprisonment.

Both defendants confessed their guilt, as agreed on during the long months of brutal State Security interrogation. Wynne displayed some obvious reservations, however, and he left little doubt about the extent of his coaching and coercion.

Penkovsky had agreed to the humiliation of a Soviet "show" trial for only one reason: to safeguard the lives of his family.

As Wynne later said, it was clear that he had made a bargain with his State Security interrogators. If he played the game, as they ordered it, his wife and children would be spared the imprisonment they might ordinarily have expected, as close relatives of an "enemy of the state."

He was probably safe in assuming the bargain would be kept. The Stalinist terror has left such a bad taste in the mouth of all Russians that reprisals against a political prisoner's family are generally unpopular. Penkovsky's wife and children never suspected the dangerous crusade to which he had committed himself. He naturally wanted to spare them the worst of its consequences.

Wynne Freed in Exchange

Wynne was released in 1964, in exchange for the Soviet spy Konon Melody, who under the name of Gordon Lonsdale had been passing information to Moscow from London. Although "Lonsdale's" espionage against the British can hardly be compared to the magnitude of Penkovsky's disclosures to the West, he was a professional Soviet intelligence officer and they wanted him back in Moscow.

The very fact that a trial had to be held must have been embarrassing to the Kremlin. But Penkovsky had to have a public trial. Eight British and U.S. diplomats in Moscow had been declared persona non grata for their connections with him. A foreign national, Wynne was directly implicated.

But Penkovsky himself was too big a fish to dismiss with the minimal notice reserved for most such offenses. The wave of transfers and demotions in the Soviet intelligence service and the army, following Penkovsky's arrest, was too large to avoid explaining. (Some 300 intelligence officers alone were hastily recalled to Moscow.)

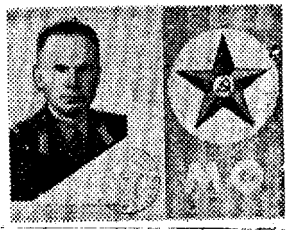
Finally Penkovsky's associates in the Army were too highly placed to avoid the most public sort of warning.

Trial Planned 6 Months

For six months the prosecution had worked out the details of those four days in court. Wynne was interrogated steadily, since the day —Nov. 3, 1962, when he was flown to Moscow after his abduction in Budapest by Soviet and Hungarian security men.

Inside the Lubianka Prison, the State Security arranged a meeting with both Penkovsky and Wynne. There Penkovsky begged Wynne to cooperate in a public trial. Wynne agreed to cooperate within limits. After six helpless months in a solitary cell of the Lubianka, there was little option left to him. He feared also, that without a public trial, nothing would be known of his fate.

In the pretrial interrogations Penkovsky, who had [illegible] of it, made no attempt to



disguise his motives and actions. He told his interrogators that he had acted not primarily to help the West, but in the best interests of his own people, the Russians. This was hardly a defense which a Soviet court would permit him to repeat in public. (It is of interest that the final statements of both defendants were made in a closed court session.)

The two defense attorneys assigned to Wynne and Penkovsky went through the motions of talking to their "clients," but only after the interrogators had finished. (Wynne's attorney, who spent most of his time in court agreeing with the prosecution, later presented him with a capitalist-sized bill.)

Defendants Rehearsed

When the trial was finally staged, both defendants had been rehearsed thoroughly, even to the point of visiting the courtroom in advance. The military court, presided over by Lt. Gen. V. V. Borisoglebskiy, called four witnesses, two of them acquaintances of Penkovsky's, and produced nine experts to certify the equipment found in Penkovsky's apartment, the security nature of the information which he gave, and other things.

In the orderly process of question and answer the whole story of Penkovsky's espionage against the Soviet Union was repeated, from the first meeting with Wynne in Moscow and the confrontation with the British and American intelligence officers in London.

Lt. Gen. A. G. Gornyy, the chief military prosecutor, summarized it at the outset: ". . . the accused Penkovsky is an opportunist, a careerist and a morally decayed person who took the road of treason and betrayal of his country and was employed by imperialist intelligence services.

"By the end of 1960 he attempted to get in touch with the American intelligence service, further exploiting the undeserved trust placed in him and his position as deputy head of the Foreign Department of the State Committee for the Co-ordination of Scientific Research Work — having, through the nature of his work, the opportunity to meet foreigners visiting the Soviet Union as members of the various scientific and cultural delegations . . ."

No Doubt of Guilt

There was no doubt that Penkovsky had engaged in the most serious sort of espionage. The catalogue of material confiscated in his apartment as read off at the Soviet trial would in itself offer ample grounds for an espionage conviction:

"During the search at Penkovsky's apartment, in addition to the already mentioned records with the telephone numbers of the foreign intelligence officers, six message postcards with instructions for them, the report and the exposed rolls of film, the following articles were discovered in a secret hiding place installed in his desk, and were attached to the file as tangible evidence: a forged passport, six cipher pads, three Minox cameras and a description of them, two sheets of specially treated paper for writing secret text, a memorandum with an indication of the frequencies on which Penkovsky received instructional radio transmission from the foreign intelligence services, the draft of a report from Penkovsky to the intelligence headquarters, the article which Penkovsky had received from the foreign intelligence services and which he intended to publish in the Soviet Union, 15 unexposed rolls of film for the Minox camera, and various instruction manuals provided by the foreign intelligence services . . . the Soniya (Sony) radio receiver which he had received from the foreign intelligence services and

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which he used to receive enciphered radio messages from the intelligence headquarters, and the typewriter on which Penkovsky typed his reports."

There was no doubt, either, whom Penkovsky had been dealing with. Witness the prosecutor's angry tirade:

"A leading role in this belongs to the Central Intelligence Agency of the U.S. —the support of the most adventurist circles in the U.S. Like a giant octopus it extends its tentacles into all corners of the earth, supports a tremendous number of spies and secret informants, continually organizes plots and murders, provocations and diversions. Modern techniques are put to the service of espionage: from the miniature Minox cameras which you see before you up to space satellites, 'spies in the sky'."

Important Facts Hidden

But what the Soviet prosecutors could not do was admit the two most important facts in the whole case: (1) Penkovsky's real identity as a colonel in Military Intelligence and the real extent of his contacts with the Soviet hierarchy; and (2) Penkovsky's real motive in betraying the Soviet regime.

In the Soviet record, he could be a drunkard, a philanderer, greedy and a girl-chaser — all these motives the prosecution clumsily attempted to adduce. But the Communist system is too brittle and insubstantial to admit that such a highly placed official could revolt against it because he thought the system was bad and wrong.

As a result the trial showed up as a farce. (Even witnesses from Military Intelligence had to be disguised as officers from the "educational branch" of the Ministry of Defense.) The Soviet prosecutors left only an agonizing question mark, when they tried to show how such a brilliant and promising officer had gone wrong.

Time and time again Penkovsky's past credentials were certified: a war hero, a brilliant officer (and even more brilliant if one included his real record in Intelligence) and a responsible Soviet official.

Then he vanished. The Fall in 1960. Despite all the prosecutors' attempts to trace the beginning of "careerism," it was, as they depicted it, a fall as abrupt as original sin and about as rationally explainable. An extraordinary gap yawned between the able, hard-working, trusted Soviet official and the cringing specimen of "moral depravity" which Gen. Gornyy presented, in a summation titled "Penkovsky's path from careerism and moral degradation to treachery."

"Penkovsky is dead," the prosecutor told Izvestia and the world, a few days after the trial ended. "The sentence was carried out on 16 May, in the second half of the day . . . When it was announced to him that the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. had denied his petition for mercy and he was to be executed, there was not a trace of the poseur's manner which he had maintained in court. He met death like a despicable coward . . ."

So ended the career of the most extraordinary volunteer spy of this century.

The Free World is forever in his debt.

By Greville Wynne

The following description of Oleg Penkovsky was written after Wynne returned from Soviet captivity. Wynne was the last Westener to see Penkovsky alive.

Oleg Penkovsky was a most extraordinary man. It was an unforgettable experience to accompany him, particularly during his first visits to London and Paris, and to see the tremendous impact of our free society on a decent, and by Soviet standards, sophisticated man, but a man who had been sheltered all his life inside the prison of the Soviet system.

It was the people in the West who impressed him most. He was amazed, for example, to find that the assistants in department stores were clean, neat in dress and well groomed, that nearly all the young ladies there were attractive, smiling and anxious to please.

He was overwhelmed by the gloomy GUM department store in Moscow and the drab shops in Gorky street with their drab, surly attendants. So I had some idea of the mental contrast he must have been making.

He was interested in religion. He had indeed been baptized himself by his pious mother. In London one day we were passing the Brompton Oratory. He asked me whether it was a church and whether he could go in to look around.

He was fascinated. "This is good," he said. "Perhaps the religious doctrine is not entirely correct, but at least it gives us a principle to guide our life. At home in the Soviet Union we have nothing. There are no principles—only what the Party tells us."

Wherever we went he was accepted as my friend. This first amazed him, but also pleased him immensely. Such a terrific contrast from the Soviet system where it is still highly dangerous for citizens to mix socially with Westerners.

He was bitter about the Soviet regime. He would weep, quite literally, when he talked about its misdeeds and the sufferings or unhappiness of his friends in the Soviet Union.

At the very end of his Paris trip he worried about going back. He knew he could stay. I shall never forget that day when I picked up Oleg in the early morning for a drive to the airport in thick fog. Then we waited for over four hours for the plane to take off. He almost stayed. His face was tense with his decision. Finally he made up his mind, turned to me and said, "Oh Greville, I must go back. I have more work to do."

Knew He Was Watched

It was then July, 1962 and he knew that the State Security was watching him. He was a lonely man in those last months in Moscow. What a burden he carried.

The more I knew him, the more I realized that Penkovsky was an extraordinarily high-mided man. He did what he did because it was the one way he, as an individual, could strike back at a system that had debased his country. I never saw him waiver from this moment we first met.

He had thought things through many months before I first made contact with him. He was willing to put up with the basic deceptions of spying and the tremendous strain of this lonely life, because he believed in a cause. He believed simply that a free society should emerge in the Soviet Union and that it could only come by toppling the only government he knew. He was a heroic figure.

I shall never forget him.

SUNDAY: What Penkovsky sent to the West—an extraordinary top-secret Soviet lecture on how to spy in the U.S.